

# On The Buses: piloting an innovative reciprocal approach to involving young people in research

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## **ARTICLE**

Since 2006, London's young people have had access to free bus and tram travel. The NIHR-funded 'On The Buses' (OTB) study is based at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), and is examining the public health impacts of this policy. This may include positive effects, such as promoting well-being by increasing young people's access to opportunities in London. There may also be negative effects, such as reducing young people's walking and therefore their exercise levels.

Since starting 6 months ago, OTB has involved 8 young people via work experience and over 40 via school workshops. For example, in March 2010 Tabitha (then Year 10) was supported by Anna in conducting a survey at her school and concluded that 'free public transport is linked with better mental health in students under 16'. Tabitha also helped deliver one of the On The Buses schools workshops, and has since returned in her holidays to join Anna and colleagues in doing observational field work on buses.

Tabitha's involvement represents part of an **innovative, reciprocal approach** which Anna has been piloting. All young people taking part in OTB work experience or schools workshops in 2010 were invited to do pilot qualitative interviews, and around a quarter accepted. It provided a quick and (almost entirely) painless way for Anna to conduct interviews and focus groups with 15 young people of different ages from all across London. By contrast, in a previous qualitative research project it was difficult to 'find' young people or get schools on board.

Moreover, young people not only contributed as participants – they also contributed as scientists. For example, Tabitha's work experience research highlighted the importance of considering mental and social well-being. This was particularly crucial since little routine information is collected on these aspects of health, and researchers can all too easily fall into the trap of thinking that what they can't measure is unimportant.

The young people involved have also provided positive feedback about being involved in the research. Describing when she presented her research findings, Tabitha says: "At first, it seemed impossible to convince the LSHTM post-graduate students but, when I started to speak passionately about the issue, my audience was engaged. *Passion* was the key to engage my audience on the issue. Next time, I will make sure I speak more, for example avoiding any complex scientific words." Tabitha and other young people have also commented that getting directly involved in this study made scientific research seem less 'serious' and more approachable, and made them realise that health research is not just about the NHS.

We therefore believe this reciprocal approach has been a success for us, and may also be useful to other groups. For researchers, it can offer a more efficient way of convincing both young people and schools to get involved. For schools and young people, it may increase an understanding of research, improve the relevance of research and increase the number of researchers willing to involve young people. The LSHTM Young Scientist Programme (which Anna organises) usually finds enough volunteer supervisors for work

experience projects, but Anna believes more staff would come forward if their research could benefit directly.

We also recognise, however, these benefits must be balanced against important ethical considerations. In particular, we do not want to undermine the altruism which currently motivates participants to take part in research, and motivates researchers to take part in LSHTM's Young Scientist Programme. For example, we do not want scientists to start offering work experience that is useful for them but less interesting or educational for the young person. Nor do we want schools or young people to feel obliged to participate in research in order to get workshops and work experience (although the modest 25% take-up rate of our invitation to take part in interviews suggests this hasn't been a problem yet). Anna and Tabitha look forward to discussing these issues more when we present at the INVOLVE conference in November – and hope perhaps to see you then

### **Notes**

For more details of LSHTM's Young Scientist's Programme, see <http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/aboutus/volunteering/ysp/>

### **Conflict of interest**

None

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